

Abstract Title Page
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Title: Evaluating Voucher Programs: the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program

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Abstract Body

Limit 4 pages single-spaced.

Background / Context:

Description of prior research and its intellectual context.

This paper is the first summary of two studies and 10 years of evaluating the Milwaukee Parental Choice (voucher) Program (MPCP). I was twice the official evaluator of the MPCP. The first evaluation, *Study I* in what follows, was from the inception of the program in 1990 until 1995; the second, *Study II*, was from 2006 to 2011. For the first study, which was the first evaluation of an educational voucher program in the United States, I was named official state evaluator by then State Superintendent of Schools, Bert Grover. The second study was written into Wisconsin legislative Act 125 in 2006. That act specified an evaluation be done and that the private schools had to cooperate with the then Georgetown University School Choice Demonstration Project (SCDP) in provision of data. I was co-principal investigator of that project at the request of the other PI, Professor Patrick Wolf of Georgetown, who later became a chaired Professor at the University of Arkansas where he moved the SCDP. These studies, especially *Study II*, are among very few evaluations of educational voucher programs in the United States. They are important studies for the methods they employ, the issues they raise, and the conclusions they reach.

Purpose / Objective / Research Question / Focus of Study:

Description of the focus of the research.

This paper will first discuss school voucher evaluations in general terms, including what we study in a broad context, and how these studies are carried out. Second, I will outline the types of studies completed in *Study I* and *Study II* and the results of those studies. I will use primarily non-technical language, but reference scholarly books and published articles and reports which of course contain technical details. The focus of these studies was on student achievement comparisons between voucher and non-voucher public school students using value-added approaches over five-year periods. *Study II* was able for the first time to study high school graduation and college enrollment (attainment).

Setting:

Description of the research location.

The voucher program was limited to Milwaukee WI from 1990-95, and 2006-2011.

Population / Participants / Subjects:

Description of the participants in the study: who, how many, key features, or characteristics.

In general, voucher students had to live within Milwaukee and come from low-income families. There were several important differences in the student populations in each study period. These differences will be analyzed in the paper. All voucher students were included in *Study I*. Control groups for *Study I* were: a matched random sample of low-income Milwaukee Public School (MPS) students; and, as a secondary comparison, the entire MPS low-income student population. A more complex, and we feel exciting matching process was used to pick a

control group matched to grade-level random samples of voucher students in *Study II*. The paper will analyze this process in detail. The samples were much larger in *Study II* because the program had grown considerably by 2006.

Intervention / Program / Practice:

Description of the intervention, program, or practice, including details of administration and duration.

Low-income students were offered educational vouchers in lieu of tuition to attend private schools in Milwaukee. In *Study I*, only secular private schools (23 at most) were in the program; in *Study II*, both secular and religious private schools were allowed (approximately 115) to enroll voucher students. If grades in private schools were oversubscribed, random drawings were to be held to select newly enrolling voucher students. Sibling rules applied so that siblings of students already attending the school were excluded from the random selection process.

Research Design:

Description of the research design.

These were both observational studies with what I will argue are suitable comparison groups. The advantages and disadvantages of various research designs, from gold standard randomized field trials to simple cross-sectional comparison will be reviewed and analyzed in the paper.

Data Collection and Analysis:

Description of the methods for collecting and analyzing data.

In both studies a wide range of data were collected over five-year periods including standardized test scores, parent and student surveys, teacher and administrator interviews, and school-level case studies. For *Study II*, attainment was analyzed for the entire voucher freshman class in 2006 (and their relevant matched control students in MPS) and a random sample of eighth grade voucher students and controls in 2006. Students were followed through high school evaluation and into college. One of the most important findings in *Study II* was that attainment was greater for voucher than non-voucher students.

Findings / Results:

Description of the main findings with specific details.

The findings are too extensive to include in a short synopsis and they require considerable nuanced discussion, which will be included in the paper itself. However, in very general terms, both studies conclude that there were no major achievement (test score) differences between voucher and non-voucher samples, but that in *Study II* voucher students graduated from high school and attended and persisted in four-year colleges at higher rates than their non-voucher MPS counterparts.

Conclusions:

Description of conclusions, recommendations, and limitations based on findings.

This paper is a summary paper reviewing and analyzing methods, results, research designs, and problems with two (at their time) landmark studies in educational choice in America. Conclusions will include recommendations for continuation of various types of choice programs, specifically comparing universal and income-targeted voucher programs. It will also defend properly organized comparative observational studies when true randomized field trials are not practical or feasible.

Appendices

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Appendix A. References

References are to be in APA version 6 format.

Witte, J.F. (2000). *The Market Approach to Education: An Analysis of America's First Voucher Program*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Witte, J.F., Wolf, P.J., Cowen, J.M., Carlson, D., and Fleming, D.F. (Dec. 2014). High Stakes Choice: Achievement and Accountability in the Nation's Oldest Urban Voucher Program. *Education Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, 36(4), pp. 437-456.